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INFO RUCNMGH/MAGHREB COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 000084

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STATE FOR NEA/FO - GRAY, CARPENTER, NEA/PI - ORBACH,
NEA/MAG - HOPKINS/HARRIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/15/2017
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [KMPI](#) [PREL](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: DAS CARPENTER'S MEETING WITH FM ABDALLAH

REF: STATE 3592

Classified By: AMBASSADOR ROBERT F. GODEC FOR REASONS 1.4 (b) AND (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: During his January 10-12 visit to Tunis, NEA Deputy Assistant Secretary J. Scott Carpenter met with Foreign Minister Abdelwaheb Abdallah on January 11. DAS Carpenter briefed Abdallah on the President's January 10 speech on Iraq. Abdallah stressed the importance of rooting out terrorism, but said "we may diverge" on the means of doing so. DAS Carpenter engaged the FM on questions of Tunisian political reform and asked why a variety of MEPI programs running well elsewhere hadn't gotten off the ground in Tunisia. While Abdallah appeared unaware of details relating to Tunisian participation in MEPI, he appeared receptive to hearing more about the programs. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) Participants:

United States

¶J. Scott Carpenter, Deputy Assistant Secretary, NEA
Robert F. Godec, Ambassador
Benjamin Orbach, NEA/PI
Susannah Cooper, PolOff (notetaker)

Tunisia

Abdelwaheb Abdallah, Minister of Foreign Affairs
M'hamed Chelaifa, MFA Director General for the Americas and Asia
Mohamed Saleh Tekaya, Office of the Minister

¶3. (C) IRAQ: DAS Carpenter began by briefing the Minister on the details of the President's January 10 speech on Iraq (reftel) and passing Abdallah a copy of the text. Abdallah said the speech was very important, but he had yet to read the details. Abdallah specifically asked about the Iraq Compact, noting that he understood the United States had previously refused to convene an international conference on Iraq. Abdallah added, "The question of Iraq is a question for the whole region...as we live the direct and indirect consequences of that situation." Further, Abdallah said that as long as violence continues in Iraq and Palestine, we will never have real peace in the world. DAS Carpenter noted that the Secretary would shortly be visiting the region to discuss both Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian issue.

¶4. (C) BILATERAL ISSUES: DAS Carpenter explained that the United States and Tunisia should find ways to broaden bilateral cooperation and move beyond stale discourse. He said the United States is committed to certain principles, which will always be discussed in the bilateral relationship.

DAS Carpenter explained that there are various ways of confronting extremism, including political means. Abdallah said that the United States and Tunisia must pull out the roots of terrorism, but "we may diverge" on how best to do so. Abdallah stressed that once the root causes of extremism are addressed, increased political space will follow, particularly regarding liberty, political freedom, and non-governmental organizations. DAS Carpenter stressed that in the case of Tunisia there was no reason not to do more now. Tunisia can find ways to increase political space for legitimate association and expression, in an effort to combat radicalism, he said. He highlighted a variety of successful MEPI programs in the region, including educational, media, banking and political programs. DAS Carpenter asked why it was that none of these programs were currently active in Tunisia.

15. (C) Abdallah acted surprised by the question, asking "In what areas do we not have cooperation?" and inquiring of his MFA colleagues, "Why don't we have these programs?" He went on to stress that Tunisia, unlike others, has a long history of institutions and democracy. Tunisia's choice of democracy is irreversible, said Abdallah, but unfortunately people misunderstand the situation. Abdallah complained about US discourse on press freedom and opined that there has been much more diversity in the Tunisian press over the past six to eight months. DAS Carpenter said the USG had noticed some small openings in freedom of expression in the Tunisian media, but that more should be done. He also used the discussion to suggest the GOT explore programs that seek to improve media professionalism and circulation. Abdallah, intentionally misunderstanding the suggestion, stressed that foreign financing for local media was "blasphemous," but that training programs were possible. (NOTE: Separately on January 11, MFA Deputy Director for North America Moez Sinaoui told PolOff the Foreign Minister was not particularly familiar with MEPI. Sinaoui suggested that post provide the MFA with a list of the programs DAS Carpenter had raised. EmbOffs, in coordination with MEPI/RO, will follow up with the MFA to suggest MEPI programs including media and educational programs. Ambassador will also provide material, including possible program specifics, to FM Abdallah. END NOTE.)

16. (SBU) BIO NOTES: Abdallah began the meeting by noting his limited English, "Sorry for my English is so bad" and later commented, "It is easier to read English than to speak it." He noted that he looks forward to his February trip to Washington, but "I prefer New York."

17. (U) This cable has been cleared by DAS Carpenter.
GODEC